Course Title: Speakeasy: The Pleasures of Writing Good Dialogue
Course Code: EGL 165
Instructor: Daniel Schifrin

Course Summary:
Why do we talk? Why do our characters talk? The goals of dialogue – in real life, as well as on the page and stage – are numerous and often contradictory. In this course we will study how people talk, and learn to transfer those insights into sharp and efficient dialogue. This is primarily a craft course; the main goal is to help students sharpen their use of dialogue in service of a new or ongoing literary project. But through our investigation of speech and conversation we will explore larger issues of identity and relationship, studying how our dialogue with others – and with ourselves – shapes who we are.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Note About Live Attendance and Recording:
These class sessions will be recorded. Ideally everyone will come to class in real time, as the live experience is always more engaging, but having the recording as a back-up for missed classes is very helpful.

Grade Options and Requirements:
- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Students must attend/watch 7 of the 8 sessions, and do the majority of homework assignments.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*
Tentative Weekly Outline:

Each week in class we will study published dialogues, create new work, and share some writing. Students will be asked to do approximately 30 minutes of reading, and 30 minutes of writing, in preparation for each class. As is true with any writing class, or any writing practice, the more work one does, the better the result. Apart from Zoom-based classes, I will hold office hours at announced times, as well as offer a 20-minute individual meeting for each student early in the course. At the end of the course, I will also offer written feedback on up to 10 pages of edited work.

Week One: Why Do We Talk?
In the real world, we start a conversation because we want something specific – to get our kids to do the dishes, or to find out why our neighbors no longer water their garden. In our first class we will explore the psychology of conversation, digging into literary and philosophical texts as well as improvising in-class dialogue. We will also investigate the subtexts of our normal speech patterns, in order to see how writers puzzle out the “complex essence” of a character’s voice.

Readings
Tayari Jones, “Finding your Story”; excerpts from Plato’s “Dialogues” and Martin Buber’s “I and Thou.”

Week Two: The Science of Dialogue
Among the craft techniques in creative writing, dialogue is often considered the hardest to “get right.” Does a writer have an ear for it, or not? While there is some truth to the “natural talent” school of dialogue, most writers can vastly improve their dialogue by analyzing its component parts. In this class we will look almost microscopically at several published (and improvised) dialogues, breaking them apart to understand the role and function of each word.

Readings

Week Three: The Music of Dialogue
The ear doesn’t lie...
In class three we will flip our brains and explore dialogue from the perspective of voice, rhythm and music, looking to more experimental writing to understand why some dialogue “just feels right.”

Readings

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650
**Week Four: “I’m Sorry, I Missed That…”**
What we don’t say is often as important as what we do. That big pause, for instance, before we answer the question about eating the cheesecake. And the way we awkwardly steer the conversation back to the bills. In this session we will train ourselves to listen for what is not said in conversation, and learn how to bring that hidden dimension into our work.

**Readings**

**Week Five: Do We Write Like People Talk? Should We? (Part I)**
Writers are split over whether “realism” in dialogue is something to mimic or avoid. When is there literary value in the “ums” and “ers” of normal speech? What can be gained by self-consciously stylized dialogue? When might we opt for perfectly calibrated, razor-sharp conversation, notwithstanding its rare appearance in most of our lives?

**Readings**
Excerpts from Roddy Doyle, “Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha,” and episodes from “The West Wing.”

**Week Six: Do We Write Like People Talk? Should We? (Part II)**
Writers who create outside of a limited autobiographical bubble must thread the needle between empathy and appropriation. There is great moral promise in expanding our worldview, as we try to write from the perspective of people and cultures distinct from our own. But how are we to know when this attempt might lead (usually unintentionally) into satire, or worse? In other words, who gets to write as – or for – others? And how do we know if we have passed the “literary” test?

**Readings**

**Week Seven: I Am Another**
How do we learn to speak like someone else? Building on our conversations about empathy and curiosity, we will learn how to identify “signature” speech patterns in our characters. Borrowing the culinary analogy of “reduction,” we will boil off the excess fat or liquid in our work in order to find a character’s essential flavor and texture.

**Readings**
Junot Diaz, “Ysrael”; excerpts from Toni Morrison, “Beloved.”
**Week Eight: “Are You Talkin' to Me?”**

To whom are we speaking when we talk? And why does that matter? In this class we will explore the slippery slope between monologue and dialogue, in the process making clear how the audience for a character's dialogue is often different than one might expect.

**Readings**